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ABSTRACT

The freshman research paper is the most institutionalized writing assignment in the academy, with the possible exception of the dissertation, and the research paper in general (of which the dissertation may be a species) is the most institutionalized genre of student writing, at least in the humanities. First, the research paper is the most time-consuming assignment of the semester and includes a variety of involvement of library staff, writing centers, teaching assistants training programs, and even regional accrediting associations. Additionally, there is little theoretical discussion of the research paper of any kind in professional publications, only articles discussing methods to help students avoid plagiarism. The research paper, based on current-traditional rhetorical and epistemological assumptions, is merely an exhaustive exercise in reporting information which precludes other rhetorical perspectives. Writing instructors need to become aware of pedagogies informed by post-modernism which can transform the genre of the research paper to help students become better readers, researchers, thinkers, and writers. (Thirty-nine references are attached.) (KEH)

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THE RESEARCH PAPER AND POSTMODERNIST PEDAGOGY

James C. McDonald

The freshman research paper, I believe, is the most institutionalized single writing assignment in the academy, with the possible exception of the dissertation, and the research paper in general (of which the dissertation may be a species) is the most institutionalized genre of student writing, at least in the humanities. The freshman research paper is usually the longest, most time-consuming (taking up over one-third of the average composition course, according to a 1982 survey by James E. Ford and Dennis R. Perry [828]), most intimidating, most frustrating, and sometimes, incredibly, the most satisfying paper that a freshman writes in composition, and finishing it (Thank God!) marks the climax of the course. Almost all freshman writing programs (78.11%) require it (Ford and Perry 827), and frequently the research paper is the only assignment specifically required in each section of freshman composition. The research paper chapter is usually the textbook's longest and may receive the closest scrutiny by textbook selection committees. Teachers spend far more time in class, in conference, and going over bibliography cards, notes, outlines, and drafts with the research paper than with any other assignment, and the English department, the library, and other parts of the university often have an unusually heavy investment in this one assignment. Almost every library (87%) offers at least a tour to students learning to write the research paper, and at most schools (66% for freshman courses, 69% for advanced) librarians lecture writing classes on

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research methods and materials, and more than half of the schools provide special training for instructors and/or librarians in teaching and supporting the student writing a research paper (Ford and Perry 829).

My own experiences teaching at five different schools reveals a variety of involvement of library staff, writing centers, teaching assistants training programs, even regional accrediting associations in the teaching of the research paper. At Winthrop College each librarian prepared to conduct two classes with students in a composition course on research methods and starting a research paper, commenting on students' responses to a library exercise designed by the library and giving each student individual attention in the library as the student began to comb through abstracts, indexes, and the card catalog, and the librarian was specially available to these students for help until the paper was finished. After much consideration, the library at Northern Illinois University began to permit second-semester freshmen writing research papers for their Composition and Literature course to use the library rather than casebooks and developed a class and handouts on how to research works of literature in various British and American periods. At the University of Southwestern Louisiana, new teaching assistants taking the practicum course are assigned to observe a composition course taught by a professor or instructor and to teach the research paper in that course. The University of Texas at Austin, in grand Texas fashion, has an entire library geared to help freshmen with the research paper. The librarians are trained to watch for freshmen who look like they need help, and

the Undergraduate Library has developed brightly colored pamphlets and exercise sheets to help students with each stage of the paper. The Undergraduate Library has multiple copies of books on popular research paper topics, monitors the topics students like to write on to guide new acquisitions, and regulates the topics available for students to write on in each class to avoid overburdening the library. Writing Center tutors often go to classes to give workshops on compiling a bibliography or developing an outline from notecards.

Certainly the peculiar and intense institutional regulation of and involvement in this one freshman assignment needs study, but, in fact, there has been little theoretical discussion of the research paper of any kind, as a quick look at the Longman bibliographies, Gary Tate's Teaching Composition, and a 1980 ERIC bibliography on the research paper by Ford, Sharla Rees, and David L. Ward show. Ford and Perry note that College English and College Composition and Communication have averaged under one article on the research paper every two years, and that the CCCC and NCTE conventions usually fail to devote a single session to the research paper and almost never offer more than one (826). Most articles discuss methods to help students avoid plagiarism and to make writing the research paper more interesting and successful. Articles debating the validity of the research paper as a genre and its value as an assignment, such as Richard Larson's 1982 "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing," are fairly common, going back almost to the time when the assignment originated, about 70 years ago.

Discussing the arguments for and against the research paper by respondents to their survey, Ford and Perry conclude that this debate reflects "that the research paper is at the center of the controversy over whether English faculty should fulfill a 'service' role to other departments" (830). But articles concerning the validity or wisdom of assigning research papers tend to ignore the institutional entrenchment of this assignment. There has been some theoretical work on the genre, mainly by cognitive theorists, including a fine article by Margaret Kantz recently in College English. Almost no historical work has been done, and post-modernist theories and pedagogies such as critical pedagogy and deconstruction associated with figures such as Paulo Freire and Jacques Derrida generally have not been applied to the genre.

The current-traditional concept of the research paper developed and hardened soon after its beginning in the 1920s. The now-familiar steps for composing a research paper--choose a subject and narrow it, compile a bibliography, take notes, write an outline, and finally compose the theme--appeared in 1930 in the first article on the subject in English Journal, James M. Chalfant's "The Investigative Theme--A Project for Freshman Composition." Chalfant's few words about the final step, writing the theme, were concerned about mechanical problems of incorporating and documenting quotations and paraphrases to avoid plagiarism. In essence, the current-traditional research paper has been an exercise in researching and reporting what others have written to produce a paper that conforms to the course's conventions governing documentation--the concerns of most

discussions of the assignment in textbooks and articles. James Berlin, in a brief discussion of the research paper in Rhetoric and Reality, writes that "the research paper represented the insistence in current-traditional rhetoric on finding meaning outside the composing act, with writing itself serving as a simple transcription process" (70). Students and teachers have commonly viewed the research paper as an expository essay that stitches together words, facts, and ideas provided by authorities. Although instructors and textbooks often have taught the research paper as a persuasive essay or an assignment in problem-solving, as Robert A. Schwegler and Linda K. Shamoon report, "students generally view the research paper as informative in aim, not argumentative, much less analytical; as factual rather than interpretive; designed to show off knowledge of library skills and documentation procedures . . . as an exercise in information gathering, not an act of discovery" (819). Students have often been told and often strongly believe that a research paper should not include their opinions. (I remember my high school history teacher telling this to my class, explaining that there was nothing new he could learn from high school boys, unless we were writing about sex, and he didn't let us write about that.) With the research paper, then, the writer is merely a reporter of information, and invention is mainly a problem of becoming familiar with the resources in the library, taking accurate and complete notes from these sources, and organizing this material effectively. Current-traditional textbooks like McCrimmon's Writing with a Purpose and Brooks and

Warren's Modern Rhetoric sometimes briefly discuss the student's responsibility to understand, evaluate, and synthesize the material he or she has collected, but once that statement is out of the way, the textbooks concentrate on the real business of composing a research paper, finding sources, taking notes, and avoiding plagiarism, and ignore problems of interpreting and evaluating the texts that the student finds on a subject and composing one's own text out of the texts of others.

From a current-traditional perspective, in fact, interpreting these texts should not be a problem, for language is merely a conduit for transferring thoughts from speaker to hearer. Writing is a simple matter of translating thoughts into words and reading a matter of translating the words back into thoughts. If the writer has written clearly, transmission to a reader should be automatic. In the first edition of the Harbrace College Handbook John Hodges gave students this advice for reading and using the texts that they discovered in their research:

> Seldom will a whole book, or even a whole article, be of use as subject matter for any given research paper. To find what the student needs for his particular paper he must turn to many books and articles, rejecting most of them altogether and using from others a section here and there. He cannot take time to read each book carefully. He must use the table of contents and the index, and he must learn to scan the pages rapidly until he finds the passages he needs. (370)

Hodges' advice to students not to read carefully, but just to scan pages quickly in search of useful passages assumes that reading is merely a matter of recognizing words and the ideas they represent and that knowledge is a commodity that one possesses. The assumption that knowledge is a commodity, of course, explains the current-traditional obsession with plagiarism and acknowledging proper ownership of ideas. Knowledge can be stolen. Books and articles here are merely containers of bits of knowledge and data which can be labeled and located by indexes. (Berlin points out that composition instructors began teaching the research paper shortly after many important bibliographical indexes began to be published and to appear in libraries [70].) Hodges' advice suggested that students use indexes much as shoppers use signs and directions in a giant mall to guide their searches to the right stores and aisles for items they "need." Hodges did insist that students "evaluate" their sources, but mainly along the lines of checking to make sure they do not buy bad merchandise: "One important consideration always is the reliability of the source. Does the author seem to know his subject? Do others speak of him as an authority? Is he prejudiced? Is the work recent enough to give the information needed?" (370). Some knowledge, like milk, has expiration dates. Once a text was certified, the information should be good. Knowledge here is information, facts, easily perceived through a see-through package of language. Chalfant suggested that the research paper was a valuable assignment because "the real distinction between the educated or trained man may often be not so much a matter of actual possession of facts

as a knowledge of where and how to find what one wants to know at the time he needs to know it" (42). The writer here is like Sergeant Joe Friday on an investigation--"Just the facts, ma'm."

Paulo Freire has called such a view of knowledge and education as "the banking concept of education," which turns students "into 'containers,' into 'receptacles' to be 'filled' by the teacher" (58). Banking education is "an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher [and in the research paper, library sources] [are] the depositor." Students are not involved in communication but instead "patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" "communiqués." The "scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits," writes Freire. "They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store." But, for Freire, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (58).

Compare Freire's description of students as "receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" of knowledge to the treatment of compiling a bibliography, gathering notecards, and composing an outline and rough draft, not only by Chalfant and Hodges, but by most current textbook chapters on the research paper. Freire's words are echoed in Schwegler and Shamoon's summary of students' descriptions of writing a research paper:

> You usually don't get around to it for a while, but when you do you start out with a little bit of an idea;

> then you get a lot of books and put the information on note cards; you keep the note cards and bibliography sorted out; then you put together the pieces of information that are related, start on a rough outline, and finally write the paper. (818)

Banking education, Henry A. Giroux writes, is more interested in students "'reproducing' history rather than learning how to make it" (120) and does not recognize "that knowledge is a social construction so that students can learn to play an active part in its production both in and out of the classroom" (121). "Implicit in the banking concept," writes Freire,

> is the assumption of a dichotomy between man and the world: man is merely _in_ the world, not _with_ the world or with others; man is spectator, not re-creator. In this view, man is not a conscious being (_corpo consciente_); he is rather the possessor of _a_ consciousness: an empty "mind" passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the world outside. (62)

The student's role is essentially to "adapt" "passively" to the world, and "the educator's role is to regulate the way the world 'enters into' the students, . . . to organize a process . . . to 'fill' the students by making deposits of information which he considers to constitute true knowledge" (62-63).

When the research paper is no longer conceived as strictly expository or informative discourse and students are expected to write evaluative or persuasive research papers, the concepts of knowledge as commodity and banking education create problems for

teachers and writers. By assigning persuasive and evaluative papers, teachers now expect students not to be passive, but to take an active role in evaluating, shaping, and creating knowledge. But the teacher and textbook generally teach the same process of researching and writing found in the first edition of Harbrace. Though teachers normally do not determine what knowledge students receive, the elaborate step-by-step process of finding sources, taking notes, composing an outline, and drafting and revising the paper with close attention to rules governing documentation, paraphrasing, and inserting quotations under the watchful eye of the teacher closely regulate how students receive and transmit knowledge. Kantz and Schwegler and Shamoon both describe students and teachers frustrated because students who go through this process normally summarize and synthesize, in other words, merely reproduce the knowledge of their sources, when the teacher expected "original" evaluations and arguments. Though these writers recognize the complicity of teachers and textbooks in creating this problem, they tend to locate the problem in the student, rather than in the nature of the research paper or the dominant concept of knowledge in education. This tendency has led many teachers to the conclusion that students simply "can't think," at least not "critically." But, as David Bartholomae writes, most of the written work that students must do "places them outside the working discourse of the academic community, where they are expected to admire and report on what we do, rather than inside that discourse, where they can . . . participate in a common enterprise" (278).

"Students need to read source texts as arguments and to think about the rhetorical contexts in which they were written," Kantz states, "rather than to read them merely as a set of facts to be learned" (78). But drawing from Linda Flower, Kantz goes on to argue that teachers and students should conceive writing a research paper as a problem-solving activity. The concept of intertextuality in post-modernist theories offers a richer view of the research paper, focusing on just what current-traditional instruction has ignored. Research paper instruction informed by postmodernist rhetorical and literary theories would treat reading sources as a creative and critical act and would closely connect and identify reading with writing. Writing a research paper could involve more than merely gleaning information from sources but could be a study of the discursive practices of texts on a particular subject in which writers consciously situate their own text in the discourse of others. I find the language of deconstruction particularly appropriate for discussing the research paper. "[N]o matter how much a text struggles to keep itself pure and different from other texts," Jasper Neel writes in Plato, Derrida, and Writing, "it originates as a weaving of prior texts. It must graft itself onto something else in order to become itself" (128). In "Derrida, Deconstruction, and Our Scene of Teaching," Sharon Crowley writes that when students go to the library to read about the subject for a paper, "they try to enter into the chain of signification which surrounds, and amounts to, discourse about their subjects" (176). All writing requires weaving and grafting of prior texts. Writers and teachers can pretend that texts are autonomous and words original

with a personal essay or an expository essay based on personal knowledge and observation. They cannot pretend this with the research paper (at least not so easily although the image of the writer as an objective reporter of information standing outside the discourse of others, not situated within it, certainly has disguised the intertextual nature even of the research paper for many writers and teachers). In a current-traditional course, the research paper is more complex to write than other types of writing--research is an added element to the writing process, and the writer must grapple with the problem of preserving her own voice and style as she incorporates the voices and styles of many writers into her text. From a post-modernist perspective, creating a voice while appropriating the discourse of others is a constant problem in the creation of any text. Neel writes that every discourse has two voices, "the 'I' of the discourse" and "the semiotic system into which the text must fit so as to be recognizable as a text . . . by providing rules for how texts operate, defining such roles as writer and reader, and setting boundaries within which the concept 'text' becomes thinkable" (121):

> These two discourses struggle continuously. The "I" attempts to make a unique statement, to reveal whatever "knowledge" the text has been shaped to carry. The system, on the other hand, constantly reveals how this particular discourse is woven into the web of similar discourses. By providing any given discourse with the context of all the other discourses that precede and

> surround it, the system reveals what this discourse borrows, what it lacks, and how it speaks only by using words and patterns that come already loaded with uncontrollable connections. (121)

The research paper could permit teachers and students to focus on the problems of learning a system and establishing a voice. Most students writing a research paper soon know how difficult it is to make a "unique statement" or "original argument," and many do unconsciously acquire many of the rules and conventions of the discourses that they study in their research. Many obviously do not. This paper is one of my first attempts to make any extensive use of the language of deconstruction or critical pedagogy. Like many freshmen, I find the language still feels alien and uncomfortable, and like many freshmen, I have wondered if I have gotten in over my head, whether I am making any sense or saying anything worthwhile. But I have also incorporated some strategies for self-protection, making plenty of use of quotations and using the rhetorical ploy of confessing my uncertainties humbly to gain the sympathy of possible critics. But this strategy is more than just a ploy for sympathy, for it has allowed me to find a way of connecting comfortable and familiar language to the still alien and uncomfortable language that I am learning. (I am also very aware that, unlike most freshmen, I have chosen to try to appropriate a language such as deconstruction only after reading and hearing dozens of arguments about the political and moral implications of this discourse.)

A post-modernist pedagogy also would demand that the class examine the language of the texts that they use to interpret the

texts and to question their authority. A pedagogy influenced by deconstruction or critical pedagogy would encourage students to ask what is missing from the texts they read, to reject the idea of an objective or disinterested report, and to explore the ideologies of texts. The importance we usually give to the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature in composing a research paper presents an opportunity to teach students critical readings of news reports and popular and influential magazines. Current-traditional pedagogy instead has encouraged a dangerous uncritical acceptance of the authority of these magazines and the news media as a whole. Freire, in contrast, holds that analyzing newspaper editorials is "indispensable" "so that people will react to newspapers or news broadcasts not as passive objects of the 'communiqués" directed at them, but rather as consciousnesses seeking to be free" (116). Neel writes that good writing teachers, like it or not, are usually practicing deconstructionists, pointing out to students what is missing from their texts. I don't see how we can do that with students' texts and not with the texts we have them read and use without encouraging a false and debilitating sense of distance and difference between the texts of students and the texts of authors.

Both critical pedagogy and deconstruction would demand that the writing course and the research paper, as Crowley puts it, "engage students with issues that concern them directly, socially, and politically, and would direct the resulting discourses into the communities where such things matter" (38).

Like Kantz, Freire advocates a "problem-posing" education (66-67), but with a difference. Students, he argues, should be "increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world [and] feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (68-69) as "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (68).

Examining the current-traditional rhetorical and epistemological assumptions behind the origin of the research paper and trying to discuss the research paper from other rhetorical perspectives have problematized this assignment for me, and at this point I can only offer a sketchy set of goals and practices. Given the extent of its institutionalization, the research paper is not an assignment that we can simply abandon, yet the assumptions behind this genre and the ways it is normally taught are now untenable. I believe that we can work out pedagogies informed by post-modernism that can transform, if not explode, the genre of the research paper to help students become better readers, researchers, and writers.

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